

Workers Struggles: The Americas

28 February 2006

Latin America

Jamaican bauxite workers threaten to strike

More than 1,500 bauxite workers employed by West Indies Alumina Co. (WIDALCO) are threatening to strike if the company does not agree to sign a contract that includes wage increases. The present conflict began in August 2005, when workers rejected a three-year contract that included a 22 percent raise for each year of the contract. Norman Dacosta, vice president of the Jamaica's National Workers Union warned last week that the mines and processing facilities will be shut down by the walkout if there is no resolution to the 20-month-long dispute.

If the strike takes place, it will be the fifth against WIDALCO, one of Jamaica's main producers of alumina, which is processed from bauxite ore and used to produce aluminum. Last year, it produced 1.3 million tons of alumina at two plants, Ewarton and Kirkivine, in the north and south of this island nation.

Two weeks ago, 1,250 workers at Alumina Partners of Jamaica (APJ) went on strike for four days to press for a wage increase. At St. Ann Jamaica Bauxite Co., 400 workers held a protest February 9 against the lack of progress in their dispute over contract violations, including a US\$48 million shortfall in incentive allowances for last year's production.

Nicaraguan government continues stonewalling health workers

The Medical Federation (FM) and the Health Workers Union (FETSALUD) met February 25 to coordinate their contract fight against the government of President Enrique Bolanos.

Three thousand public health doctors, members of FM, have been on strike for more than three months demanding a 30 percent wage increase. Nicaraguan public health doctors are the worst paid in Central America. FETSALUD nurses and other public health doctors are not on strike but are demanding a 48 percent increase. Both unions have been negotiating separately.

So far, the Bolanos government continues to stonewall

both unions, claiming that its agreements with the International Monetary Fund forbid all increases in the government budget deficit and all wage agreements above 9 percent.

Last week, FETSALUD leaders announced their intention to mobilize support among the people served by public health clinics to pressure Bolanos. Government officials have suggested that one way to avoid increasing the budget deficit would be to drastically reduce the number of public health workers in order to grant wage concessions to remaining workers.

Chilean metal workers strike

Metal workers on strike against Soinsa, a maker of scaffolding and related building construction equipment, entered the second month of their strike last week. The workers, many of whom earn the minimum wage, are demanding that Soinsa distribute 4 percent of its 2005 profits to its employees.

On February 1, when the strike was seven days old, a demonstration by the metal workers and their supporters was brutally attacked by Santiago's police, with many workers and union delegates beaten and arrested. A demonstration the next day to protest the repression was also attacked by the police, who used a light tank to disperse workers. Since then, the police have been stationed inside the plant. Striking workers report having seen children as young as 10 years old being used as strikebreakers inside the plant.

United States

Comair moves to void labor agreements with flight attendants

Attorneys for Comair, the low-cost subsidiary of Delta Airlines, filed a motion on February 21 with a New York bankruptcy judge to void the labor agreement with its 1,100 flight attendants. Comair has already reached agreements for \$17.3 million in concessions from its 1,700 pilots and another \$1 million in concessions from 600 mechanics. Neither agreement can be implemented unless the company obtains concessions from flight attendants.

According to Teamsters Local 513, which represents flight attendants at Comair, the airline is seeking cuts that would amount to \$10,500 a year in wages and benefits. Wages would be reduced by 20 to 26 percent, retirement contributions would cease, and Comair would introduce part-time flight attendants into the work force. Currently, Comair flight attendants have starting wages of \$16,000 a year and a maximum salary of \$40,000.

Comair had been running in the black up until its parent, Delta, declared bankruptcy last fall. Delta cut its reimbursement rate to Comair by 3.8 percent—a figure that will cost Comair some \$42 million a year—and included the subsidiary in its bankruptcy filing.

Strike over medical costs hits helicopter manufacturer

Workers at Sikorsky Aircraft Corp. in Connecticut and Florida walked off the job February 20 over the company's effort to impose a greater burden of medical and insurance costs on workers. By more than a 2 to 1 margin, the nearly 3,600 members of Teamsters Local 1150 rejected a contract that proposes to increase workers' portion of health care coverage for families from \$26.05 a week to \$52.12 a week in the first year and then to \$72.77 in the contract's third year.

On top of these co-payments, workers are also expected to pay 20 percent of most medical procedures and prescriptions whose costs will be capped at anywhere from \$3,000 to \$5,000 for families and \$1,200 to \$3,000 for singles. Roco Calo, Local 1150 secretary-treasurer, told the *Hartford Courant*, "If people are living paycheck to paycheck, how are they going to come up with the \$5,000? It's just like they're uninsured."

United Technologies Corp., the military contractor and parent company of Sikorsky, has been pushing this policy throughout its corporate operations in an attempt to maximize profits. Sikorsky manufactures both commercial and military helicopters such as the Black Hawk.

Strike at Connecticut nursing home over health care coverage

Some 100 dietary workers and nurses picketed in front of the Tandet Center nursing home in Stamford, Connecticut, to announce the beginning of a three-day strike over the failure of management to agree to an acceptable contract. Workers at the facility have been without a contract since September 30 and are opposed to the demand by the home's owner—Stamford Health System—that they pay for health insurance.

Stamford is offering a 9.5 percent raise over the course

of the proposed three-year agreement along with some increases to pension funds. But the company is also insisting on health insurance payments of \$115 a month from workers. Management's proposal also fails to guarantee job security to union employees.

Last October, HP Acquisitions Inc. from Atlanta bought the Tandet Center from Stamford Health Systems and will take over operations in May. Currently, a federal mediator is being sought to bring the two sides together for new contract talks.

Canada

Nova Scotia rehab workers vote to strike

Three hundred twenty workers at Kings Regional Rehabilitation Centre in Waterville, Nova Scotia, voted 78 percent on February 21 to give their union, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 1472, a strike mandate. They have been without a contract for 15 months, and the Local 1472 president says that the general conclusion is that bargaining a new contract is a very low priority for the employer. The previous three-year contract took two years to negotiate. Contentious issues include outstanding casual employment issues from the last round of bargaining and the union's demand for increases in family leave and dental benefits.

Wastewater workers in Ontario vote to strike

All 14 wastewater treatment workers in Woodstock, Ontario, voted on February 16 in favor of a strike if a deal cannot be reached with county authorities. They are demanding wage parity with other workers in the province who provide similar services. The workers, who include operators and maintenance staff of the county's wastewater treatment plants, are members of CUPE Local 1146. Their last contract expired at the end of 2004, and conciliation talks are scheduled for February 27.



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